

HONORING DR. MOHAMED EL ERIAN, CELEBRATING EGYPT

Faiza Shereen

“There was a time as a young child in Cairo when I believed that Egypt could do anything. I felt proud to grow up in a country that had overcome decades of British colonial rule . . . I was thrilled to live in the undisputed leader of the Arab world. And I was delighted that Egypt joined India and Indonesia to lead the “nonaligned movement” of the world’s young and newly independent nations. It was a period of pride and hope for many Egyptians. Yet all this was shattered by the shock of a humiliating defeat in the 1967 war with Israel.”

Dr. Mohamed El Erian’s sentiments expressed in the quote above, and with which he began his address last Sunday, February 13, evoked familiar feelings that reverberated through the UCLA Faculty Center, where an audience of over 200 had gathered to honor him as the 2011 recipient of the Egyptian American Organization’s Outstanding Achievement Award.



“Having left [the country],” he continued to say, “I never anticipated that, one day, I would again experience such feelings of intense Egyptian pride. Well, the feelings are back; and I owe this to a remarkable secular movement that bravely took to the streets of Cairo, helped Egyptians overcome decades of fear and, collectively, chase out a regime thought by many to be among the most entrenched in the world.” Like him, many of the older Egyptian Americans in the audience had been taken by surprise—not only by the extraordinary events of Tahrir Square—but by the emotions they recalled.

Dr. El Erian had prepared a talk that he put aside, deciding that current events demanded that he speak about Egypt. Pointing out the unique aspects of this revolution--focused on its legitimate demands, this uprising denigrated no outsider; it did not resort to violence, even when attacked by the regime’s thugs; it did not require or request foreign assistance--he concluded that this “improbable feat” was a “home-made people’s revolution; one whose foot soldiers deserve the peace prizes usually given to reformist elder statesmen.”

We have all been taken by surprise. We have all been victims to some extent of the view--strategically maintained by Mubarak’s regime—that Egypt must be ruled by an iron fist, that any alternative spelled disaster and would reek havoc. But the architects of this revolution refused to be paralyzed by fear.

One feature of this brave new order is a transformed political consciousness that, among other things, invalidates the escalating inter-religious conflict (encouraged by whom?) leading to inflamed rhetoric on both sides which further aggravates the situation, distracting Egyptians from their main enemy and turning them upon each other. In a BBC report, Maha Abdelrahman is quoted saying: “the state's major crime has been in the way it has indirectly incited and fuelled sectarian tension between Muslims and Christians.” Only a few weeks before the Tahrir events, I wrote a response to the bombing that had killed Copts in Alexandria that I threw away when the uprising began. While these aggressions and eruptions of violence are real and deserve to be addressed, millions of Muslim Egyptians-- the vast majority-- denounce these acts and object to the use of Islam by their perpetrators. As Boutros Boutros-Ghali stated in an interview with Spiegel online: “Our ties are far too old to be destroyed. Copts and Muslims have lived together in Egypt for 14 centuries. There have always been highs and lows between the religious groups, but never collective hate toward one another. I'm actually far more inclined to believe that the massacre in Alexandria will strengthen our bonds.” Ghali's assessment is proven right. The current revolution has shown how quickly and readily Christian and Muslim Egyptians come together in the name of Egypt. Copts and Muslims have prayed together, in churches and mosques, and in the streets. The slogan from the 1919 revolution, “the crescent and the cross,” is all around us, asserting Muslim/Christian solidarity. In all the events of the 18 days, not one church has been attacked or any violent act perpetrated in the name of religion.

What we are witnessing is a paradigm shift, and the ways of the last half century are no longer viable. El Erian pointed out that one of the reasons that Mubarak was not able to contain the revolution is that he failed to understand that it is no longer “business as usual.” It's a new Egypt.

Reminding us, lest the euphoria of the moment becomes blinding, that hard work lies ahead, El Erian pointed out that “the challenge now is to turn the nation's energies to its economic, institutional, political and social rehabilitation.” He stressed that this process must start immediately. “To support this Egypt's economic and political institutions must be revamped, to ensure greater transparency, accountability, and checks and balances. It is important that happens in a manner that discourages the personality cults that so undermined the country in the past.” Indeed, El Erian addresses here a tradition of deifying that has been with us, perhaps, since Pharaoh. Whether it's object is “*mawlaya*,” “*ma'aleek*,” “*el rayess*,” “*ya basha*” or simply “*sa'at el modeer*,” the cult of the individual as personifying power must give place to the democratic culture of placing the power in the institution itself. For this to happen, the health of the institutions must be insured.

The EAO congregation on Sunday, February 13, was richly engaging for two reasons: the spirit of pride and hope infused by the current events and the eloquent, warmly genuine, and intellectually vibrant address of the man whose outstanding achievement we were proud to honor.

• For a published version of Dr. El Erian's address, please see:
“The Road from Tahrir Square to Democracy”
<http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/7911777a-387d-11e0-959c-00144feabdc0.html#axzz1DzeVZRAN>

• Detailed references for quotations available.